

## No answers to why some swim areas are unsafe

06/27/02

BY KEN GOZE

Winnetka, Glencoe News, Wilmette Life

High bacteria counts that led to a record number of beach closings in Illinois last year appear to be returning this summer, and experts have no definite answer as to why some North Shore beaches such as Glencoe have been hit harder than others.

They have long suspected sea gulls and storm runoff, but some environmentalists and Illinois lawmakers also blame the city of Milwaukee for dumping too much sewage-tainted water into the lake.

Glencoe, which had 18 beach closings last season, has had nine closings so far this year, said Mike Kudla, Glencoe Park District assistant director for recreation. The beach opened Memorial Day weekend and began full-time operations the following week.

"It's pretty disappointing for this early in the year," Kudla said.

The impact on swimmers was lessened because many find the water too cold to enjoy in early June, he said.

Like other area beaches, Glencoe tests the water each day, incubating samples overnight and counting the number of colonies that grow. Some measure fecal coliform bacteria, a group of bacteria associated with sewage. In that test, 500 colonies per 100 milliliter triggers beach closings. Glencoe has switched to a test for *E. coli*, which is considered more specific and has a cutoff of 235 per 100 milliliters.

Kudla said the process is now automated. Sample trays hold water in a tiny ice-cube type tray, which is sealed, incubated and counted by a machine at the water plant.

"It does the counting by itself so you don't have to have a technician counting colonies under a microscope," Kudla said.

The main weakness of all such tests is the 24-hour wait. By the time a closing is announced, swimmers have been exposed to the higher bacteria levels. Very few seem to suffer any effects.

"I've been working around the beach here for 21 years. In that time, I've heard from a couple of people who had a stomach ache after they got home, but that was usually after they heard reports of beach closings," Kudla said.

Uneven pollutants

He has studied the problem and consulted experts, but so far has only a partial answer on why Glencoe has had so many closings. Kudla said heavy rainfall and runoff from streets and ravines seem to be a main cause, and the way the beach angles might tend to catch more pollution or churned sediment from the northeast.

Wilmette's closings last year were limited to three days in August after downpours filled the Deep Tunnel system and led to the release of untreated water from the North Shore Channel

and Chicago locks. Wilmette uses a coliform test at two locations along Gillson Beach, and keeps closings in effect until two good readings come back.

Winnetka recorded a total of 11 closings among three beaches last year, said Liza McElroy, Winnetka Park District director. In six of those closings, all three were closed while others affected one or two locations. The number is consistent with past years.

"We have not closed at all this year. Our bacteria levels have been extremely low," McElroy said.

The Lake Michigan Federation and Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, believe part of the problem comes from Milwaukee. In a May 24 letter signed by seven other members of the congressional delegation, Schakowsky demanded action from the Environmental Protection Agency.

They said Illinois beach closings rose to 339 last year, up from 10 in 1994.

"While increased monitoring may have some effect on the number of closings, there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that sewage overflows from Milwaukee are responsible for much of the deteriorating beach health conditions in Illinois," they wrote.

"Milwaukee discharges a larger amount of waste into Lake Michigan than any other city. The city has drained nearly 1 billion gallons of sanitary sewer overflows - industrial, domestic and other heavily polluted waste - into the lake since 1995. Since the early 1990s, it is estimated that Milwaukee bypassed approximately 13 billion gallons of untreated wastewater into Lake Michigan."

Schakowsky's press secretary, Nadeam Elshami, said Milwaukee officials have met with her staff, but the EPA so far has not responded to the letter.

"We certainly hold to the position that the discharge taking place is polluting the lake, and beach closings are the symptom of a bigger problem," he said.

Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District officials could not be reached, but did respond to the letter on a district Web site. Executive Director Kevin Shafer said evidence points to local runoff and sea gull waste, not Milwaukee overflows.

"DNA studies and other beach research indicate that MMSD overflows are not causing beach closings in Milwaukee, so it's laughable to say that our overflows are closing the beaches in Chicago," Shafer said. "We have the lowest number of overflows of any large city in the United States and we're spending nearly \$1 billion over the next eight years to make MMSD's conveyance system even better."

Environmentalists say Chicago also has its own problems with overflows, although the amount of discharge to the lake has been lower than Milwaukee's.

"Last summer, over 1 billion was discharged into the lake, as much as had been released over the previous decade," said Laurel O'Sullivan, pollution prevention coordinator for the Lake Michigan Federation. "When you're talking about that amount of wastewater, it's a huge problem."

Relief is not in sight for most of the northern suburbs served by the Deep Tunnel system. The four tunnel systems were designed to work in conjunction with three large reservoirs, but only one has been built for the small system near O'Hare Airport.

Work is set to begin on a temporary 3 billion gallon reservoir serving the Calumet tunnel branch south of Chicago, but a larger reservoir to serve the main branches in Chicago and Des Plaines will not be online for almost another 15 years, according to officials at the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District.